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Team Teaching in High School

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For a social studies teacher and an English teacher, team teaching provides daily, targeted professional development.

In an age when educators are looking for ways to help teachers, especially new teachers, become stronger and less stressed, we've found that a good alternative already exists in high school—team teaching.

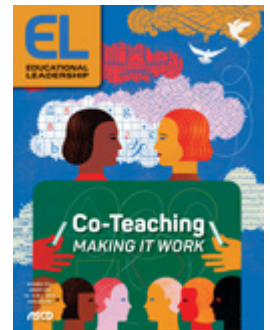
Fifteen years ago, Yorktown High School in Arlington, Virginia, faced an achievement gap that was partly the result of the stress that incoming freshmen experienced in shifting from middle school to high school. Yorktown is a highly competitive school in an affluent community (only 14 percent of our 1,800-plus students qualified for free and reduced-price lunch in 2014). Demographically the school is 65 percent white, 17 percent Hispanic, 8 percent Asian, and 5 percent black.¹

Arlington had embraced the middle school model, in which students were taught by teams of teachers. This approach was successful at the middle school level, but an unintended consequence was that when students moved into the high school—and faced seven different teachers and seven different sets of expectations—they wanted and needed similar support.

To aid students in their transition, Yorktown High School began to combine English and history classes into one daily 90-minute block period so students would have at least two classes and two teachers in common. Thus, teaming was born at Yorktown High School.

The approach yielded several benefits for the students. Two teachers worked together to help students understand high school expectations as well as study skills and organizational strategies. Two teachers with a common set of students could more readily identify the difficulties that students were having and more quickly coordinate supports across the school and departments than one teacher working in isolation could. In addition to integrating the curriculum, the teachers could provide greater consistency of rules, expectations, and assessments, which further helped students make a successful jump from middle school.

Students certainly benefited—but so did the teachers. We've discovered that working closely with a colleague has energized and strengthened us as professionals. It's provided us with the opportunity to learn with and from each other and to take risks. Together, we've supported each other emotionally and grown as professionals.

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Teaming in Action

Our teaming looks different on different days depending on the needs of our curriculum and our students. We have a total of 90 minutes to divide as we see fit. This structure lets us use time in a way that benefits our students. Some days we teach or facilitate a lesson together. Ken may introduce the lesson, then Terry takes over to make sure students understand the process and assessment requirements, and then we each circulate to support students as they work. For combined lessons, we divide the projects or papers and assess them using a rubric we developed together. Grades for the assignment are then entered in both our English and history grade books.

Sometimes Ken begins with an activity on a particular point in history; and later in the period, Terry conducts a discussion of the literature being read, making connections to the time period Ken covered. We have an open classroom (with a movable wall that allows us to combine or separate the two classrooms), so much of the time each of us can observe what the other is saying and doing.

Three Benefits for Teachers

Too often at the high school level, teachers work in isolation. Teaming offers an effective antidote: It provides a comfortable environment in which to grow because it enables each teacher to learn from another professional on a regular basis. Here are some of the major benefits we've experienced.

Teaming Promotes Teacher Growth

The beauty of the team relationship is that it enables each member to maximize his or her strengths for the good of the team. In our team—Ken is the social studies teacher and Terry is the English teacher—we always joke that one of us is the muscle and the other is the timepiece. In other words, one of us is great at getting students back on task, and the other is great at making sure the task is completed in the allotted period of time.

Every time we plan a unit together, we're challenged in a positive way. Teaming helps us see a lesson, a unit, or even an entire course through a different pair of eyes. For every unit we teach, we typically have one meeting to plan the big picture, in which we identify curriculum objectives and then discuss points of intersection. This leads to discussions of the final assessments and the types of lessons we'll develop.

Once our "big picture" meetings are complete, we continue to meet several times a week to hone the unit plan. These meetings give us a chance to ask questions about our delivery of instruction or about student progress and find ways to address any challenges.

When starting to plan, we normally consider our own timelines and curricular objectives first. For instance, Ken needs to cover World War II as part of his curriculum and Yorktown 9th graders are required to read Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Although learning this history is important, we've realized that one of our most important objectives with this material is a discussion of difference and tolerance. So these ideas have become the focus of discussions and assessments, from debates in history class on what constitutes a war crime to seminar discussions of how a lack of tolerance leads to atrocities—both big and small—in English.

Another example is a unit in which Ken covers the French Revolution and Terry has students read *A Tale of Two Cities*. Although students can study this history and the novel independently, blending the curriculums so they're covered at the same time allows students to spend double the time talking about the topic.

When we began teaching together five years ago, we shared what we knew and had already done, which frequently led one of us to try something the other had found successful. With a master's degree in special

education, Ken knows a great deal about differentiation; Terry has more experience in teaching writing. Working together has allowed us to learn strategies from each other that made each of our classes stronger.

For instance, our final research project brought together strategies and skills students learned in both classes. We drew on both our strengths to create an assessment that reflected mastery of research skills, writing and citation skills, higher-order thinking, and collaboration, as well as allowing personal differentiation. Students researched a person from history and developed an analytical essay arguing whether that person is worthy of either a monument in his (or her) honor or a memorial to those hurt by the person's actions. Students partnered with a peer who researched the same person to design the monument or memorial and write a speech to discuss its symbolism.

Teachers engaged in teaming get to observe colleagues in action, frequently without sacrificing planning time; when one of us takes the lead, the other observes. The observer frequently offers constructive feedback, making suggestions about how part of a lesson might be shortened to provide more time for something equally meaningful, how to work with a particular student, or how to keep certain students on task.

Such daily constructive criticism is much more effective than feedback from the typical administrative observation. Teachers and administrators frequently view the latter more as an evaluation than an opportunity for professional growth. If teachers are nervous about the potential effect of an observation on their employment, they're going to be more focused on not messing up than on professional development and improvement. In contrast, because team partners have similar goals—making instruction for students as good as possible—they more readily accept feedback.

Teaming Encourages Professional Risk Taking

Teaming also encourages us to try new things. Our school system recently introduced a one-to-one computer initiative; all our freshmen—as well as the teachers—received new laptops. The expectation was that we would find effective ways to incorporate the technology into our instruction. What may have been daunting when working alone became easier because we could pool our knowledge.

To maximize the new computers as a tool, we chose to focus on Google Classroom as a means of providing instructional materials, organization, and feedback to students. Together we figured out how to navigate the program; but, more important, when problems arose, we were better able to solve them. If a student was having technical difficulties, for instance, one of us assisted the student while the other took the lead in instruction. If some elements of Google Classroom were more intuitive for one of us, that person could teach it to the other. Our experience learning to use this new instructional tool was also organic—we developed confidence as we went along because we had another person continually present to help when we became stymied.

We find ourselves more willing to take educational risks because teaming saves us one of a teacher's most valuable resources—time. Once partners know each other's strengths, they can divide the design of classroom materials and assessments to allow for the development of innovative ideas. Dividing work enables teachers to incorporate new resources faster. For example, when we got our iPads, Ken wanted to try a lesson using the application Inspiration to have students design timelines that argued for which ten events most influenced the Enlightenment. Terry decided to use the application as well and developed a similar timeline activity for *Romeo and Juliet*. Because the assessments had similar goals, the collaboratively designed rubric served for both assignments, which provided more time to experiment with the new program.

The luxury of having both time and constructive feedback as we develop ideas and materials has made us more willing to try new things, reflect on our practice, and improve assignments *in real time*, as opposed to waiting until the following school year to make revisions and reflect.

Teaming Provides Emotional Support

Teaching is, by nature, an emotional job. Teaming offers the support to cope with the variety of emotional stresses that teachers typically experience. Studies have shown that one-third of teachers leave in their first three years of teaching and that 46 percent leave in the first five years, largely because of job stress.² Dealing with parents, administrators, other colleagues, and students challenges us in myriad ways—and having someone who understands the classroom dynamics, time constraints, and one's own perceived professional inadequacies is priceless.

Small stresses that build over time can be especially debilitating. As a result, we often proofread each other's professional e-mails to ensure correct tone, and we meet collectively with parents, counselors, and other stakeholders. One of us will do the "heavy lifting" during a particular week if extenuating circumstances make long hours more challenging for the other team member. One of us also serves as an ear if the other needs to vent. Such supports don't naturally exist in most schools, but they certainly aid in job satisfaction and career longevity.

A Word on Challenges

With all the benefits to teaming, there are some hurdles. On a practical level, giving two teachers the same students in common during the same two periods can be a scheduling challenge that the school administration needs to support. At Yorktown, freshmen are scheduled into blocks of history and English back-to-back; this results in a group of roughly 50–55 students for a 90-minute period.

This large group also needs a large space. As a result of our commitment to teaming, when it came time to design a new building, the administration and architects made sure there were numerous rooms with collapsible walls between them. We've also found that regular collaboration time is an essential ingredient to a successful team; safeguarding this time in the master schedule can be another challenge.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to teaming is finding teachers who are open to learning from one another and to the possibility of adapting their approach to gain a better end product. Teachers need to enter into a teamed relationship voluntarily. At our school, English and history teachers are encouraged to create teams on their own, and a team remains in place as long as both partners are happy. When a new team is required, teachers are asked whether they're interested in teaming up; sometimes we've hired new teachers who are excited about teaming.

The administration needs to support this culture of collaboration. If common planning time, professional development, and classroom proximity aren't a priority, teams will find it difficult to thrive.

Reap the Rewards

Schools that commit to teaming by providing the required time and resources will experience the benefits. Good teachers will become great teachers because of all the invisible supports that teaming offers, which will ultimately benefit students. When stakeholders work together in professional learning communities, students benefit as teachers improve their craft. The teaming partnership pays similar professional dividends daily and serves as a two-person professional learning community. We know that teaming has made us better teachers—and we hope more of our colleagues will have the opportunity to experience this for themselves.

Endnotes

¹ Yorktown High School. (2014). School Profile. Retrieved from www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/2432/YHS%20Profile%202014-15.pdf

² Kopkowski, C. (2008, April 5). Why they leave. *NEA Today Magazine*. Retrieved from www.nea.org/home/12630.htm

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